Democracy Dies in Darkness

Uncovering the truth about international adoption

"Daughters of the Bamboo Grove" by Barbara Demick and "A Flower Traveled in My Blood" by Haley Cohen Gilliland shine light on terrible practices in China and Argentina

July 25, 2025

Review by Kristen Martin

A rosy adoption narrative relies on simplicity: A needy orphan is embraced by noble, loving parents who treat them no differently than they would a biological child. When it comes to international adoption, this standard fairy tale has long been entwined with the American Dream: A needy orphan, languishing in an overcrowded and dilapidated institution, is rescued by American parents who provide them with opportunities they could never dream of in their country of origin.

Recently, though, testimony from adoptees and birth parents — as well as investigations by government commissions and recommendations from international bodies — have punctured the feel-good narrative, bringing to light how financial pressures, coercion, religious intolerance, and even trafficking and fraud have long infected an institution that is supposed to put children first.

In 2019, the United Nations General Assembly issued a Resolution on the Rights of the Child, focused on children without parental care. It urged member states to "combat illegal adoptions and all adoptions that are not in the best interests of the child." This guidance came after a decade marked by scandals, with one major "sender" of children after another suspending international adoptions: Vietnam and Guatemala in 2008, Ethiopia in 2018. In 2024, Denmark and the Netherlands halted international adoptions by their citizens, citing concerns about falsified paperwork and abuse. Last month, Sweden completed an inquiry that found evidence of fraud and child trafficking in international adoptions dating back as far as the 1970s. Earlier this year, South Korea, which has sent 200,000 children abroad since the end of the Korean War, formally admitted that its adoption agencies had systematically falsified documents to create "orphans."

As the world grapples with all this damning evidence, two new books illuminate historic incidents of states kidnapping and adopting out children. In "Daughters of the Bamboo Grove: From China to America, a True Story of Abduction, Adoption, and Separated Twins," Barbara Demick investigates how, in the early 2000s, as demand for adoptable babies peaked in China, the government agency responsible for enforcing the country's one-child policy began kidnapping "excess" children and turning them into paper orphans. Haley Cohen Gilliland's "A Flower Traveled in My Blood: The Incredible True Story of the Grandmothers Who Fought to Find a Stolen Generation of Children" focuses on the terror of Argentina's Dirty War in the 1970s and 1980s, when a military junta disappeared leftists and "subversives," including hundreds of pregnant women, and stole their newborns, in many cases giving them to military families.

Though the examples Demick and Gilliland highlight are extreme, they are important records of how governments frequently turn to family separation as a punishment tactic — and how adoptees, biological families and adoptive families are all left to wrestle with terribly complicated questions of identity and what it means to be a family.

The kidnapping scheme laid out by Demick in "Daughters of the Bamboo Grove" was born of a confluence between the Chinese Communist Party's one-child policy and American demand for adoptable Chinese babies. The party passed the one-child law in 1979 and swiftly erected an elaborate surveillance bureaucracy to enforce it, installing offices of the National Family Planning Commission in even the most remote villages.

But in the 1980s and 1990s, even with draconian policies in place, approximately 100,000 to 160,000 children were abandoned each year, owing to fears of fines for "excess" births and an ingrained societal preference for sons. In 1991, China opened itself to international adoption, and Westerners, especially Americans, were eager to welcome abandoned baby girls into their families, motivated in no small part by news stories detailing horrific instances of unwanted daughters being killed or discarded.

By the early 2000s, improved economic conditions and social changes had led to a dwindling number of abandoned babies. But, Demick explains, "there was big money in adoption, and the orphanages had become dependent on it."

As Demick learned in 2009, through her reporting as a China correspondent for the Los Angeles Times, Family Planning workers had begun a kidnapping spree around 2002, violently snatching babies and toddlers from families strategically targeted for their extreme vulnerability. "The parents were often migrants who had left their children with illiterate grandparents; they were exceptionally poor," Demick writes. "They lived deep in the mountains, out of touch with others and less likely to make a fuss." The workers told the families that their children were being "confiscated" because they had violated the one-child policy. They did not tell them that the children were taken to orphanages to be placed for international adoption. Orphanages created false backstories for each stolen child. Demick cites an estimate that 10 percent of Chinese adoptees were kidnapped and trafficked, mostly after 2000.

One part of Demick's report in the Los Angeles Times focused on a particularly wrenching story: that of twin girls born in 2000, one kidnapped by Family Planning as a 21-month-old. The story featured a video of Shuangjie, the twin who was still with her family, talking about her missing sister, Fangfang.

In "Daughters of the Bamboo Grove," Demick writes of what happened in the aftermath of that article and how she played a central role in locating Fangfang — who was with a Texas family, and now named Esther — and eventually reconnecting her with her birth family, the Zengs. This kind of meddling in a subject's life is considered hazardous ethical ground for a journalist, and Demick admits as much.

In 2017, when Esther was 16, she felt ready to explore her tragically complicated roots, and Demick facilitated her reunion with the Zengs. Such a reunion could be fodder for a pat happily-ever-after, but Demick largely sidesteps this temptation, focusing instead on the delicate and awkward process of forging a sustained relationship, across linguistic and cultural divides, with family members who were

long strangers and who suffered a traumatic fracture.

Gilliland's "A Flower Traveled in My Blood" highlights a somehow even more sadistic form of political punishment. Following a military coup in Argentina in 1976, the stern and exacting Jorge Rafael Videla led the country through a years-long "National Reorganization Process," which Gilliland calls "a bland name for a brutal plan to quash political violence and restore what he saw as the essential values of the state." The United States financially supported the junta, which it considered an ally in the Cold War. Videla led the junta through the Dirty War, systematically disappearing about 30,000 supposed "subversives." Among them were more than 300 pregnant women.

Like Demick, Gilliland uses the story of a single family to illuminate the broader devastation, casting them as the protagonists of her cinematically detailed, deeply researched narrative. In October 1978, Patricia Roisinblit; her 15-month-old daughter, Mariana; and her partner, José Manuel Pérez Rojo, were kidnapped outside Buenos Aires. Patricia and José had been active in the Montoneros, a leftist group, but had recently settled into civilian life, giving up their activism as Videla's purge intensified. Military officers released Mariana ("We don't kidnap children," they claimed), but José and Patricia, who was eight months pregnant, were imprisoned and tortured. Shortly after Patricia gave birth to a healthy baby boy in a notorious secret detention site, she was forced to hand over her son, whom she'd named Rodolfo Fernando. Patricia and José were never seen again.

As José's parents raised Mariana, Patricia's mother, Rosa, began a futile search for her pregnant daughter. Rosa, a retired obstetrician who averted her eyes to politics, hadn't known that for some time a brave and stalwart group of women like her had been protesting for the return of their own children and grandchildren — known, like the rest of those who had been disappeared, as desaparecidos. These women marched weekly in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, across from Videla's presidential mansion. They wore white kerchiefs on their heads, to symbolize the cloth diapers their children had once worn, and walked in pairs to stay within the law — the junta prohibited gatherings of more than two. By the end of 1978, Rosa joined their fight.

Through Rosa's involvement, "A Flower Traveled in My Blood" traces the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo's decades-long struggle to find out what happened to their children, to recover their loved ones and to hold the junta accountable. Whereas the Chinese parents whose children were kidnapped were poor and lacking in connections and power, the well-heeled Abuelas in Argentina used their appearance as kindly, harmless grandmothers to their advantage. Over the course of Videla's rule, they secretly plotted visits to orphanages and family courts, wrote letters to the United Nations and others, and collected anonymous tips about suspicious adoptions.

In 1979 and 1980, they located the first sets of stolen grandchildren, who had been kidnapped as toddlers and infants, left in public places, and adopted by unsuspecting families who were operating in good faith. "The Abuelas had always imagined that finding their grandchildren would be their greatest challenge," Gilliland writes. "They had not anticipated that what happened after might prove just as complicated." Some of the children remembered being violently snatched away from their birth parents. Like Esther, they considered their adoptive parents to be their families now and were terrified

of being separated.

These conundrums multiplied when the Abuelas began locating grandchildren who had been illegally adopted by members of the same military that had disappeared their children. Military families typically passed off the stolen babies as their own, meaning that the children grew up thinking their "appropriators," as they came to be known, were their birth parents. Such was the case with Patricia and José's son, Rodolfo, who was taken by a military couple who had struggled with infertility. They renamed him Guillermo.

Rosa and Mariana would not locate Guillermo until 2000, 17 years after the restoration of democracy and 16 years after genetic scientists pioneered tests to confirm the biological relationships between suspected relatives. For years, Guillermo struggled to accept that the people he thought to be his parents had participated in his kidnapping and that his biological parents had probably been brutally murdered. As is the case with the majority of the desaparecidos, their bodies have never been found. Guillermo was left to "construct a new identity on a foundation of tragedy and trauma," Gilliland writes. Though he eventually forged strong bonds with Rosa, his relationship with his sister Mariana, who had yearned for him for decades, fractured over his continued allegiance to his adoptive mother. They have been locked in bitter silence for years.

Though China ended its one-child policy in 2016 and was closed to international adoptions in 2024, the Family Planning workers responsible for kidnapping and trafficking babies have met with only a modicum of punishment. As Demick writes, it is among the episodes of "very recent Chinese history that are willfully submerged."

In Argentina, after Videla stepped down in 1981 and democracy was restored two years later, the Abuelas weathered decades of waxing and waning support for their cause as the country "seesawed between the opposing impulses of reconciliation and justice, between the drive to forget and the obligation to remember," Gilliland writes. It was not until the 2010s that Videla and other perpetrators of human rights abuses were held accountable.

Current Argentine President Javier Milei, a self-described anarcho-capitalist who campaigned on the promise to "destroy" the government, has consistently minimized the human rights abuses of the junta and argued that the desaparecidos were all terrorists. He has slashed subsidies to the Abuelas and recently issued a decree to restructure the biobank that the Abuelas pioneered to preserve the genetic material of the relatives of desaparecidos. This suppression of collective truths insults and obstructs the hundreds of families still searching for their "living disappeared."

Kristen Martin is a cultural critic based in Philadelphia and the author of "The Sun Won't Come Out Tomorrow: The Dark History of American Orphanhood."

Daughters of the Bamboo Grove

From China to America, a True Story of Abduction, Adoption, and Separated Twins

By Barbara Demick.

Random House. 331 pp. $32

A Flower Traveled in My Blood

The Incredible True Story of the Grandmothers Who Fought to Find a Stolen Generation of Children

By Haley Cohen Gilliland.

Avid Reader. 472 pp. $30

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